
Employee Spotlight: Dave Keller

June 2, 2014



It's 2 o'clock in the morning and pitch black. While most Laboratory employees are getting a good night's sleep, wildlife biologist Dave Keller and a colleague are up and about, stopping by the Environmental Protection Division's office in White Rock to pick up a four-wheel-drive government vehicle and head out to look for Mexican Spotted Owls, a federally listed threatened species living on Laboratory property.

By the time Keller and his travel partner reach the first of 10 survey locations for the night either by car or part way by foot, it's about 3 a.m. Keller plays a recording of a Mexican Spotted Owl's call, a high-pitched hooting sound of four spaced notes—*hup, hoo-hoo, hooo*—with the two middle notes closest together. The owls have established territories and hearing what seems like another owl prompts them to respond, letting the visitor know that the space is already occupied.

From the end of March into early May, near the beginning of the Mexican Spotted Owl's nesting season, Keller and the Laboratory's other wildlife biologists complete four

nighttime surveys for each Lab area, separated by a week. The biologists monitor the owl's population size and locations and record noteworthy changes.

Keller repeats playing his owl recording at 15-minute intervals and carefully listens into the night in between. Neither he nor his colleague speak in the deep dark, but they periodically take a sip of hot tea to stay warm. Sometimes the partners are lucky and hear a response from either a lone owl or from a female and male near their nest.

After a while Keller and his companion drive to the next location and continue their mission until dawn.

What wild creatures need

Resources

- To learn more about Mexican Spotted Owls, go to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's [Spotted Owl](#) website. You can hear the owl's call by clicking on Cornell Lab's "Sound" tab.
- To see live owls close up, try YouTube's [Mexican Spotted Owls preening](#) video.

A few hours after the nocturnal owl survey, Keller is back in his office in White Rock, catching up on paperwork or reviewing Lab project proposals from a wildlife biologist's viewpoint. To protect the Mexican Spotted Owl or other threatened or endangered species during nesting season Keller, for example, may recommend postponing the start of a project until the wild animals' young are ready to strike out on their own or moving the project to a location farther from sensitive habitat.

Keller thinks a lot about the needs of the wildlife who call the Lab grounds home, and he tries to look at the land from the creatures' perspective. "Does the habitat have all that the animals need?" he wonders, for instance. "Do the wild animals have an undisturbed place to live, do they have enough water and food, does the area have an adequate number of potential mates?"

In many ways Keller considers the Laboratory's holdings an ideal home for wildlife since large tracks of land have been protected from commercial development. "The Lab is almost like a pristine national park," Keller suggests. "Our Mexican Spotted Owls at least seem to think so."

Dave Keller works for the Environmental Protection Division's Environmental Stewardship group.

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